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ABSTRACT

Noting that the child support collection system is an important source of economic support for many Minnesota children and that child support contributes significantly to children's well-being beyond providing financial benefits, this special Kids Count report examines the child support system in Minnesota. The report provides information about how the system works, the family arrangements, the child support payment levels for Minnesota children, the economic impact of child support, the role of non-custodial fathers, and problems with unpaid support. Child support data are also presented on a county-by-county level, as are suggested ways to improve the child support system in Minnesota. Contains 15 endnotes. (KB)

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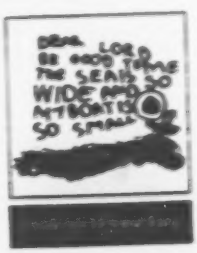
Child Support in Minnesota

kids count minnesota

Fall 2000

This special report examines the child support system in Minnesota. It provides information about how the system works, the family arrangements and child support payment levels for Minnesota children, the economic impact of child support, the role of non-custodial fathers, and problems with unpaid support. It also presents data on a county-by-county level, and suggests ways to improve the child support system in Minnesota.



Minnesota KIDS COUNT, a joint project of the Children's Defense Fund-Minnesota and Congregations Concerned for Children, is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and provides county-by-county assessment of the condition of Minnesota's children. Minnesota KIDS COUNT releases periodic reports and an annual databook to provide a statistical profile of Minnesota's children and suggestions for action on their behalf. This report is available on the CDF-MN web site at *http://www.cdf-mn.org* or by calling 612/870-3670.

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The child support collection system is an important source of economic support for many Minnesota children. In state Fiscal Year 1999, 267,000 Minnesota children received services from county and state child support offices and a total of $443 million in child support was collected and disbursed.[1] This is more children than are served through either the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), food stamps, or free and reduced price school lunch programs.

Research suggests that besides providing financial benefits, receiving child support improves the overall well-being of school age children, particularly their cognitive development, academic achievement and behavior. Income from child support is also associated with more positive outcomes for children than are other sources of income.[2]

Family Arrangements and Child Support Payments

In 1997 the Urban Institute surveyed families throughout the United States, including Minnesota, for the national Survey of America's Families, and asked about child support[3] (see Table 1). Over one third of children in the U.S. and x% in Minnesota have a parent living outside of the household. In Minnesota, 86% of these children have non-resident fathers, and 12% have non-resident mothers. Many children with non-resident parents have limited contact with them. Thirty-one percent saw their non-resident parent at least once a week in the past year, 46% saw their non-resident parent less than

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A Brief Overview of How the Child Support System Works

The child support office or a parent may ask the court to issue a support order. This can occur as part of a court order in a divorce, paternity action, child custody action, or order for protection. The court sets the amount of child support, medical support, and child-care support that a non-custodial parent must provide. The amount is determined using guidelines in state law.

Most child support is collected through automatic income withholding through the non-custodial parent's employer. When a parent does not pay child support, child support offices can take the following actions: credit bureau reporting, new hire reporting, driver's license suspension, occupational license suspension, passport denial, tax refund intercept, and collection of other income including reemployment insurance, workers compensation and lottery winnings.

The first step needed to collect child support for children born to unmarried parents is establishing the child's legal father. (If the non-custodial parent is the mother or if married parents are divorced, this step is not needed.) Parentage can be established if the mother and the father agree that he is the father of the child and then sign the Recognition of Parentage form.[15]

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once a week, and 23% didn't see him or her at all. Children are more likely to see their mothers than their fathers. Only 7% of children hadn't seen their mothers in the past year, while 27% hadn't seen their fathers.

Only 57% of Minnesota children, and 52% of all children nationally, received any financial support from their non-resident parent in the past 12 months. Children in Minnesota with a child support order from a court were almost twice as likely to receive at least some financial support from their non-resident parent, although only 51% received the full amount of the order. This is significantly higher than the national rate of 44%. Twenty-six percent received part of the order, and 23% received nothing. For Minnesota children without a child support order, only 26% received any financial support.

When compared to other states, Minnesota tends to do well in its collection of child support. Of thirteen states studied in the Urban Institute study, Minnesota was the most likely, next to Wisconsin, of having children who receive the full amount of child support due. Nonetheless, only 29% of those with a child support order fell into this category.

Child Support and Poverty Reduction

Nationally, children with a non-resident parent were nearly four times more likely to be poor than children who live with both of their parents (defined as a family income below 200% of the federal poverty line.) Child support payments do have some effect on overall child poverty rates, even though the average amount of child support payments made through the state child support system is not large. The average child support payment collected for families not currently on public assistance in Minnesota was $215 per month in SFY1999. The average child support payment collected and paid to the state on behalf of families currently receiving assistance was $44 per month.[4]

Estimates by the Urban Institute found that if child support were not paid, 39% of children with a parent living elsewhere would have been poor in 1996, compared to 37% that were actually poor. In other words, child support payments reduced poverty among these children by 5%.

Only 29% of poor children with a non-resident parent receive child support. However, for poor children who receive support, it is an important source of income: in Minnesota, children who had non-resident parents and whose families received child support obtained 15% of their family income from child support. Poor children who received child support averaged 23% of family income from child support, and those who received child support but not welfare obtained 47% of family income from child support.[5]

When families do not receive child support payments, they may turn to public assistance for financial help. In a survey of both recipients and new applicants to the Minnesota Family Investment Program, Minnesota's welfare program, 28% cited loss of support

Table 1: Child Support Payments and Parental Involvement, Minnesota

Status	Children with Nonresident Parents (%)	Children with Nonresident Fathers (%)	Children with Nonresident Mothers (%)
In the Past 12 Months, Received *Any* Financial Assistance from Nonresident Parent	57	63	26
Have a Child Support Order	58	62	33
Have a Child Support Order and Receive:			
Full Amount of Order	51	52	41
Part of Order	26	28	13
Nothing	23	20	46
Have No Child Support Order and Receive Financial Support	26	31	11
In the Past 12 Months, Have Seen Their Nonresident Parent:			
At Least Once a Week	31	28	38
Some, but Less Than Once a Week	46	45	55
Not at All	23	27	7

From: National Survey of America's Families, Urban Institute, 1997. Analysis from *Child Trends*, Washington, DC.

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from a spouse or partner as a reason for needing assistance, and 11% indicated it was the single most important reason. Twenty-one percent indicated that divorce was the reason they needed the program. Twenty-one percent of the current recipients surveyed had child support payments paid monthly to the state.[6]

Poor children with a non-resident parent who are African American or Hispanic, or whose custodial parent has not completed high school, are significantly less likely than other children to have a child support order and receive financial assistance from their parent. Non-residential parents tend to be of the same race or ethnicity as their previous partner and to have similar educational levels. These are also characteristics that tend to lead to lower earnings and might make it difficult to expand orders and financial support for more poor children.[7]

Fragile Families

A new longitudinal study from the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing at Princeton University is collecting information on the conditions and capabilities of new unwed parents, especially the fathers, focusing especially on their earnings capacity and their propensity for violence. They want to understand the nature of the relationship between unwed parents, what factors push new unwed parents together and pull them apart, and what the long-term consequences of family arrangements are for children in fragile families.

The initial phase of the study found that the vast majority of unwed fathers do not have problems with drugs or alcohol and are not physically abusive, according to the mother's reports. Most are also not in jail or prison. However, nearly 40 percent have no high school diploma, nearly 20 percent did not work a regular job during the past year, and those who worked had very low earnings. These men are also strongly attached to their families at the time of birth, even though they are not married to their children's mother; 80% are romantically involved, and over 90% of the mothers want the father to be involved in raising the child. Further data collection will help answer questions about the effect of public policy on parents' relationships, and affect on the child's well-being over the first four years of life.[8]

Child Support Arrears

Arrears, or child support owed but not yet paid, can quickly accumulate into a large debt. In federal Fiscal Year 1999, about $1 billion in arrears was due to families in Minnesota through the child support collection system. Some of this amount may be recent ($1.3 million is from 1999) and some may be many years old.

The federal office of Child Support Enforcement recently reissued a policy clarifying that states have the authority to reduce or forgive unpaid child support obligations owed to them. Possible programs include providing a framework that allows parents and the state to negotiate and voluntarily reduce the accumulated debt; creating amnesty programs; suspending child support orders during incarceration; and suspending orders during a parent's participation in a program designed to improve their employment situation.[9]

The Minnesota Department of Human Services is considering offering some type of plan to forgive or reduce child support debts owed to the state. The hope is that parents would be more willing and able to pay currently due child support if they were not facing an overwhelming past debt.[9]

The Role of Non-Custodial Fathers

In the last few years, greater attention has been paid to the role of non-custodial fathers. Projects have focused on changing the employment and behavior of fathers with the hope of increasing child support for their children.

The average non-custodial father has the financial ability to pay child support. Younger fathers and those who have never married have considerably less capacity to pay due to their own low incomes. However, even while some fathers may not be able to pay much child support at the time of paternity establishment, research shows they will likely experience a significant increase in income over the following years, enabling them to pay greater amounts of support.[10]

Currently, forty-three states report engaging in or planning strategies to help fathers be better economic providers for their children, including programs which are designed to improve the job skills, wage levels, and parental involvement of low-income fathers. However, the only project of this type that has been rigorously evaluated, Parents' Fair Share, found that it had few significant effects on the employment and earnings of low-income men. Parents' Fair Share produced small increases in the amount and likelihood of child support payments, primarily through outreach and case review which uncovered previously unreported employment, allowing the child support agency to institute wage withholding.

As a recent report by the National Association of Child Advocates notes, "Fatherhood initiatives have yet to be proven effective in increasing the amount of money available to or well-being of children. Until they are more thoroughly evaluated, fatherhood initiatives should not be allowed to replace more proven methods of supplementing or growing the income available to low-income custodial families."[11]

Minnesota County Data[12]

Minnesota KIDS COUNT looked at five county-level indicators to evaluate and compare the performance of the child support system: the total number of cases, total expenditures per open case, the number of cases per "case-related" staff (this excludes support staff), percent of cases with a court order, and percent of children with paternity established (for children whose parents were never married.)

Number of Cases and Expenditures

Between 1995 and 1999, child support expenditures increased by 45% in Minnesota, from $54.4 million to $79 million. The number of cases increased by 16% during the same period. Put another way, the amount of expenditures per case increased by 26%. Almost all counties saw an increase in both expenditures and cases, although these increases varied greatly. Some of the increase is due to increased state funding for computer system expenditures.

Counties differ in their expenditures per case. In 1999, expenditures per case for Minnesota as a whole were $350. This represents a range from less than $225 to more than $700 per case. Counties that spend more per case do not share many characteristics in common (see map). They vary by region of the state, the size of their caseloads, and their performance on other measures of child support.

Caseload Size

As expenditures and cases increased, the size of caseloads decreased somewhat. Because establishing and enforcing child support orders is often a complex and lengthy process, lower caseload sizes is a positive trend. The number of cases per case-related staff decreased by 8% statewide during 1995-99, from 297 to 272. Two thirds of counties had decreases in caseload size, from 1% to more than 50%. (Please note that very small counties may have only one or two staff and can show large increases or decreases with just a small change in staffing patterns.)

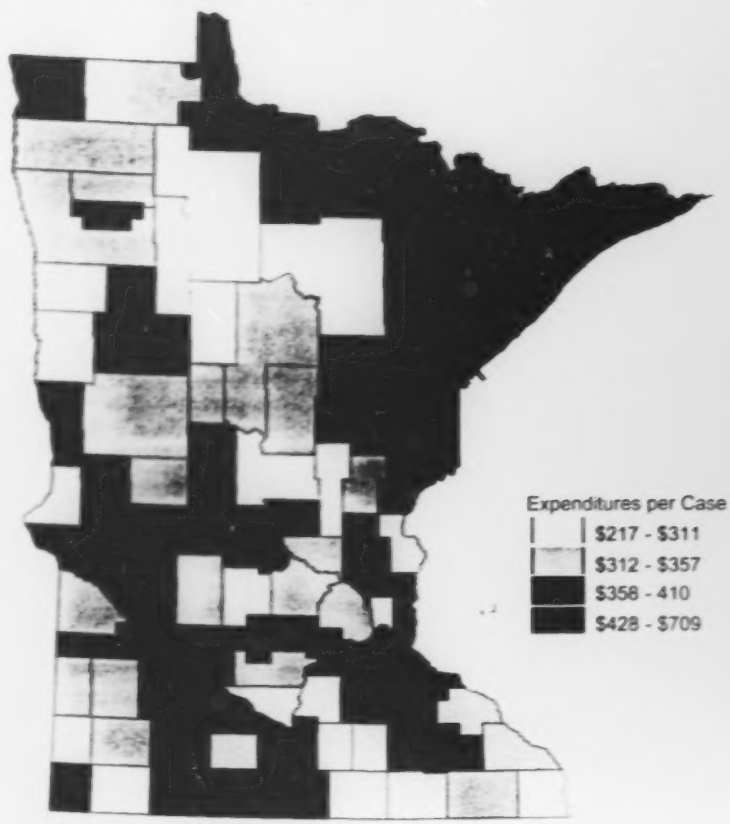
Percent with Court Orders

As the Urban Institute research showed, children who have a court order for child support are more likely to receive support and to receive larger support amounts. In Minnesota, 71% of cases in the child support system in 1999 had a court order. This remains relatively unchanged from 1995. An average of $2,800 was collected per case with a court order, compared to $1,927 for all cases. Most counties showed only modest change in this indicator, but Stearns, Chisago, Isanti, Becker, and Anoka counties increased the number of cases with court orders by more than 10% since 1995.

Percent with Paternity Establishment

If children in the system who were born to unmarried parents do not have paternity established, it is difficult for the state to collect child support from a non-custodial father. (Default orders are possible against an alleged father who does not respond to a court summons.) In 1999, the Department of Human Services reported that 50% of children born to unmarried parents had paternity established. In 1995, 65%

Map 1: County Child Support Expenditures per Open Case, 1999



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had paternity established, but changes in the computer system collecting this data make comparisons before 1997 unreliable. Counties ranged from between 37% and 70% on this indicator.

Improving Child Support Collections

An extensive study by the Urban Institute documents three tools of the child support enforcement system that improved the likelihood that children of both never-married and divorced single mothers would receive financial support. These are:

- allowing parents on welfare to receive directly some of the money paid to the state for child support;
- intercepting tax refunds from non-custodial parents who are not paying support; and
- using presumptive guidelines for child support payment amounts.

Two other policies – immediate wage withholding and voluntary in-hospital paternity establishment – improved the likelihood of receiving child support for some groups of mothers (the wage withholding worked for previously married mothers on public assistance, and the paternity establishment impacted never-married mothers not on public assistance).[13]

How is Minnesota doing in implementing these child support enforcement system tools? Over 70% of all child support money collected by the state of Minnesota is collected through wage withholding, a 17% increase from 1998 to 1999. Minnesota also intercepts federal and state tax refunds: almost 5% of total collections in 1999 were from these sources. Minnesota has also implemented a program to increase paternity establishment voluntarily at the time of birth, by asking parents to complete a Recognition of Parentage form.

There are two areas where Minnesota could improve its implementation of these successful strategies. The first is to revise the child support order guidelines. A state task force has been meeting throughout the past year.

The Child Support Enforcement Division of the Department of Human Services is preparing a major overhaul of the child support guidelines for consideration in the 2001 legislative session. The proposal will follow an income shares model used in thirty-three other states. Under the model, called Shared Responsibility, the court will first look at the income of **each parent** and determine each parent's share of their combined income. Next, the court will determine the income needs of the child. Finally, the court will determine the support amount by dividing up the child's needs by each parent's share of the overall income. This model will simplify child support calculations, acknowledge the reality that many children spend time in the homes of both of their parents, and focus support orders on the needs of the children.

The second needed change is to restore the pass-through of child support payments to families receiving welfare, and to disregard at least a portion of that income. Seventeen other states have some type of disregard program of child support payments for families receiving welfare. Although the Minnesota legislature passed a law to technically "pass through" child support directly to families on MFIP beginning January 1, 2001, these families will see their grants reduced by one dollar for each dollar of child support they receive. ◆

Endnotes

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5. Data from National Survey of America's Families; analysis from Child Trends, Washington, DC.

6. Minnesota Department of Human Services, Program Assessment and Integrity Division. *Minnesota Family Investment Program Longitudinal Study: Preliminary Baseline Report*. March, 1999.

7. Sorensen, Elaine and Chava Zibman. "To What Extent Do Children Benefit From Child Support?" *Assessing the New Federalism*, Discussion Paper. Urban Institute, January 2000.

8. Turetsky, Vicki. *Realistic Child Support Policies for Low Income Fathers*. Kellogg Devolution Initiative Paper. Center for Law and Social Policy, March 2000.

9. Hopfensperger, Jean. "Amnesty Pondered for Child Support." *Star Tribune*, Sunday, June 25, 2000, page 1A.

10. Finkel, Jackie and Paula Roberts.. *The Incomes of Noncustodial Fathers: What We Do and Do Not Know*. Center on Law and Social Policy.

11. National Association of Child Advocates. *Low-Income Noncustodial Fathers: A Child Advocate's Guide to Helping Them Contribute to the Support of Their Children*. Issue Brief, February 2000.

12. All Minnesota Child Support data is taken from annual Performance Reports published by the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

13. Sorensen, Elaine, Ariel Halpern. "Child Support Enforcement: How Well Is It Doing?" Discussion Papers, *Assessing the New Federalism*, Urban Institute, December 1999.

14. Garfinkel, Irwin, and Sara McLanahan. "Fragile Families and Child Well-Being: A Survey of New Parents." *Focus*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Spring 2000.

15. Minnesota Department of Human Services. *Understanding Child Support, A Handbook for Parents*. Undated.

COUNTY	# of cases, SFY1999	% change from 1995	Expenditures per case, SFY1999	% change from 1995	# of cases per case-related staff, SFY1999	% of cases with a court order, SFY1999	% of children w/paternity established, SFY1999
Aitkin	783	14%	$ 396	-2%	191	80%	46%
Anoka	13,647	13%	$ 363	-6%	257	82%	52%
Becker	1,752	-5%	$ 377	7%	250	81%	37%
Beltrami	2,785	18%	$ 273	12%	366	62%	48%
Benton	1,398	17%	$ 428	9%	209	76%	56%
Big Stone	214	5%	$ 377	3%	214	79%	55%
Blue Earth	2,101	13%	$ 375	33%	300	87%	70%
Brown	854	16%	$ 391	27%	190	91%	56%
Carlton	1,970	21%	$ 442	27%	219	77%	55%
Carver	1,589	24%	$ 520	62%	167	87%	68%
Cass	1,499	28%	$ 343	34%	319	61%	47%
Chippewa	488	17%	$ 377	11%	203	88%	40%
Chisago	1,648	10%	$ 356	49%	220	86%	57%
Clay	2,866	13%	$ 240	-10%	302	84%	55%
Clearwater	648	8%	$ 304	18%	309	76%	56%
Cook	147	30%	$ 511	47%	147	63%	43%
Cottonwood	549	0%	$ 364	47%	220	68%	44%
Crow Wing	3,082	24%	$ 312	13%	308	76%	43%
Dakota	11,217	26%	$ 560	35%	188	84%	59%
Dodge	614	0%	$ 457	27%	154	83%	53%
Douglas	1,183	21%	$ 319	-9%	208	80%	55%
Faribault	1,902	35%	$ 363	44%	246	83%	55%
Fillmore	534	5%	$ 321	151%	267	91%	32%
Freeborn	1,524	13%	$ 268	-17%	311	84%	65%
Goodhue	1,784	14%	$ 451	84%	223	87%	58%
Grant	209	31%	$ 372	165%	261	61%	34%
Hennepin	65,114	22%	$ 327	45%	255	56%	45%
Houston	591	23%	$ 304	42%	197	87%	41%
Hubbard	863	29%	$ 217	32%	432	71%	42%
Isanti	1,291	21%	$ 428	44%	168	84%	47%
Itasca	2,557	22%	$ 297	34%	304	78%	53%
Jackson	485	19%	$ 410	41%	202	86%	70%
Kanabec	843	17%	$ 340	57%	187	69%	57%
Kandiyohi	1,924	23%	$ 345	31%	221	77%	54%
Kittson	127	13%	$ 520	-4%	159	85%	36%
Koochiching	776	16%	$ 367	10%	277	85%	43%
Lac qui Parle	230	46%	$ 341	-9%	192	67%	43%
Lake	403	8%	$ 410	-21%	288	86%	50%
Lake of the Woods	176	26%	$ 473	12%	176	85%	34%
LeSueur	1,009	13%	$ 311	24%	266	76%	39%
Mahnomen	410	37%	$ 380	-62%	186	51%	54%
Marshall	298	27%	$ 326	-21%	149	79%	44%
McLeod	1,158	23%	$ 388	420%	252	84%	66%
Meeker	854	25%	$ 290	32%	214	79%	58%
Mille Lacs	1,205	28%	$ 235	54%	603	77%	60%

COUNTY	# of cases, SFY1999	% change from 1995	Expenditures per case, SFY1999	% change from 1995	# of cases per case-related staff, SFY1999	% of cases with a court order, SFY1999	% of children w/paternity established, SFY1999
Morrison	1,415	18%	$ 248	14%	283	84%	59%
Mower	2,088	16%	$ 264	47%	278	79%	55%
Nicollet	1,119	16%	$ 288	-11%	249	88%	64%
Nobles	1,065	37%	$ 292	18%	217	63%	45%
Norman	183	9%	$ 301	32%	458	80%	59%
Olmsted	4,246	22%	$ 494	56%	236	81%	47%
Otter Tail	2,178	32%	$ 315	59%	272	78%	47%
Pennington	785	18%	$ 352	41%	253	71%	55%
Pine	1,528	20%	$ 394	58%	235	82%	63%
Pipestone	461	22%	$ 269	51%	231	92%	59%
Polk	1,741	4%	$ 336	18%	268	80%	55%
Pope	325	9%	$ 543	42%	203	92%	35%
Ramsey	33,059	13%	$ 288	17%	312	63%	51%
Red Lake	135	39%	$ 603	-27%	135	73%	48%
Redwood	754	65%	$ 434	-22%	215	63%	55%
REGION 8 N	1,577	13%	$ 327	42%	232	80%	56%
Renville	485	23%	$ 429	28%	162	79%	66%
Rice	1,902	6%	$ 391	24%	293	80%	64%
Rock	315	13%	$ 458	37%	166	84%	61%
Roseau	628	16%	$ 350	4%	314	83%	46%
Saint Louis	9,991	-2%	$ 358	22%	307	79%	59%
Scott	2,459	27%	$ 452	16%	275	83%	60%
Sherburne	1,953	26%	$ 357	-8%	244	77%	52%
Sibley	512	29%	$ 314	6%	322	77%	56%
Stearns	4,169	15%	$ 401	31%	271	78%	52%
Steele	1,218	19%	$ 308	17%	174	76%	54%
Stevens	230	26%	$ 375	8%	230	83%	68%
Swift	399	24%	$ 579	22%	249	76%	55%
Todd	1,121	20%	$ 363	3%	220	89%	48%
Traverse	211	24%	$ 246	-46%	234	81%	22%
Wabasha	740	26%	$ 333	-6%	224	73%	42%
Wadena	806	18%	$ 324	27%	299	82%	60%
Waseca	762	17%	$ 263	-8%	224	84%	58%
Washington	4,913	19%	$ 397	23%	214	85%	62%
Watonwan	607	27%	$ 299	65%	289	72%	52%
Wilkin	340	5%	$ 468	23%	148	71%	50%
Winona	1,846	-3%	$ 349	22%	264	86%	52%
Wright	3,149	5%	$ 352	32%	213	82%	60%
Yellow Med.	319	7%	$ 709	54%	160	87%	49%
STATE	223,457	14%	$ 350	26%	272	71%	50%

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CDF- MN 1999 Annual Report: Helping Children Grow

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